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10 Skills You Need to Succeed at Almost Anything



What does it take to succeed? A positive attitude? Well, sure, but that's hardly enough. The Law of Attraction? The Secret? These ideas might act as spurs to action, but without the action itself, they don't do much.

Success, however it's defined, takes action, and taking good and appropriate action takes skills. Some of these skills (not enough, though) are taught in school (not well enough, either), others are taught on the job, and still others we learn from general life experience.

Below is a list of general skills that will help anyone get ahead in practically any field, from running a company to running a gardening club. Of course, there are skills specific to each field as well – but my concern here is with the skills that translate across disciplines, the ones that can be learned by anyone in any position.

1. Public Speaking

The ability to speak clearly, persuasively, and forcefully [in front of an audience](#) – whether an audience of 1 or of thousands – is one of the most important skills anyone can develop. **People who are effective speakers come across as more comfortable with themselves, more confident, and more attractive to be around.** Being able to speak effectively means you can sell anything – products, of course, but also ideas, ideologies, worldviews. And yourself – which means more opportunities for career advancement, bigger clients, or business funding.

2. Writing

[Writing well](#) offers many of the same advantages that speaking well offers: good writers are better at selling products, ideas, and themselves than poor writers. **Learning to write well involves not just mastery of grammar but the development of the ability to organize one's thoughts into a coherent form and target it to an audience in the most effective way possible.** Given the huge amount of text generated by almost every transaction – from court briefs and legislation running into the thousands of pages to those foot-long receipts you get when you buy gum these days – a person who is a master of the written word can expect doors to open in just about every field.

3. Self-Management

If success depends on effective action, effective action depends on the ability to focus your attention where it is needed most, when it is needed most. [Strong organizational skills, effective productivity habits](#), and a strong sense of discipline are needed to keep yourself on track.

4. Networking

[Networking](#) is not only for finding jobs or clients. **In an economy dominated by ideas and innovation, networking creates the channel through which ideas flow and in which new ideas are created.** A large network, carefully cultivated, ties one into not just a body of people but a body of *relationships*, and those relationships are more than just the sum of their parts. The *interactions* those relationships make possible give rise to innovation and creativity – and provide the support to nurture new ideas until they can be realized.

5. Critical Thinking

We are exposed to hundreds, if not thousands, of times more information on a daily basis than our great-grandparents were. **Being able to evaluate that information, sort the potentially valuable from the trivial, analyze its relevance and meaning, and relate it to other information is crucial** – and woefully under-taught. Good [critical thinking](#) skills immediately distinguish you from the mass of people these days.

6. Decision-Making

The bridge that leads from analysis to action is effective [decision-making](#) – knowing what to do based on the information available. While not being critical can be dangerous, so too can over-analyzing, or waiting for more information before making a decision. **Being able to take in the scene and respond quickly and effectively is what separates the doers from the wannabes.**

7. Math

You don't have to be able to integrate polynomials to be successful. However, **the ability to quickly work with figures in your head, to make rough but fairly accurate estimates, and to understand things like compound interest and basic statistics gives you a big lead on most people.** All of these skills will help you to analyze data more effectively – and more quickly – and to make better decisions based on it.

8. Research

Nobody can be expected to know everything, or even a tiny fraction of everything. Even within your field, chances are there's far more that you don't know than you do know. **You don't have to know everything – but you should be able to quickly and painlessly find out what you *need* to know.** That means learning to use the Internet effectively, learning to use a library, learning to [read productively](#), and learning how to leverage your network of contacts – and what kinds of research are going to work best in any given situation.

9. Relaxation

[Stress](#) will not only kill you, it leads to poor decision-making, poor thinking, and poor socialization. So be failing to relax, you knock out at least three of the skills in this list – and really more. Plus, working yourself to death in order to keep up, and not having any time to enjoy the fruits of your work, isn't really “success”. It's obsession. **Being able to face even the most pressing crises with your wits about you and in the most productive way is possibly the most important thing on this list.**

10. Basic Accounting

It is a simple fact in our society that money is necessary. Even the simple pleasures in life, like hugging your child, ultimately need money – or you're not going to survive to hug for very long. **Knowing how to track and record your expenses and income is important just to survive, let alone to thrive.** But more than that, the principles of accounting apply more widely to things like tracking the time you spend on a project or determining whether the value of an action outweighs the costs in money, time, and effort. It's a shame that basic accounting isn't a required part of the core K-12 curriculum.

What Else?

Surely there are more important skills I'm not thinking of (which is probably why I'm not telling Bill Gates what to do!) – what are they? What have I missed? What lessons have you learned that were key to your successes – and what have you ignored to your peril?